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SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINSK WEEKLY POL/ECON REPORT - July 13, 2007

¶1. The following are brief items of interest compiled by Embassy Minsk.

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Civil Society

¶2. Top Election Official Rules Out Dialogue with Opposition

Head of the Central Election Commission (CEC) Lidiya Yermoshina on July 5 ruled out the possibility of CEC dialogue with the opposition on amendments to electoral regulations. According to Yermoshina, only equally strong parties with "similar power ratings" were able to hold a dialogue [with the CEC]. Moreover, Yermoshina did not see what there was to discuss. The CEC head hailed Belarus' electoral regulations for following major OSCE norms and standards and stipulating foreign and domestic observation and monitoring. Yermoshina dismissed OSCE's recommendations on electoral procedures, arguing that they were numerous and often contradictory. Speaking about 2008 parliamentary elections, Yermoshina noted that the CEC would schedule them for October 2008.

¶3. Civil Society Activist Loses Lawsuit, Remains Expelled

On July 5, Yuri Aleinik lost an appeal over his May 15 expulsion from the Presidential Management Academy for 22 alleged unexcused absences. The judge ruled that the Academy was accountable to the president and, therefore, did not fall under the court's jurisdiction. Lawyers from the Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC) accused authorities of expelling Aleinik for his civil society

activities. More than 250 fellow students signed a petition supporting Aleinik, but the Academy rector refused to receive him and the Presidential Administration would not review his complaints.

Aleinik will appeal to the Minsk City Court and the UN Human Rights Council.

¶4. Youth Opposition Activist Faces Jail Term

On July 6, Soligorsk authorities formally charged 16-year-old Malady Front (MF) activist Ivan Shilo with acting on behalf of an unregistered organization. He faces up to two years imprisonment. The prosecutor's office required Shilo to write a pledge not to leave the city until after the trial scheduled for August 10. Shilo claims that much of the evidence against him was baseless and contradictory.

¶5. Brest Authorities Ban Kozulin Demonstration

Brest authorities on July 9 granted members of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (BSDP) permission to hold a demonstration on July 10 in support of imprisoned former presidential hopeful Aleksandr Kozulin, but only at the sports stadium on the outskirts of the city and not on city streets or squares. The BSDP found the location "unfeasible" and plan to appeal the authorities' decision.

¶6. Independent Journalists Honor Disappeared Colleague

The Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) on July 7 held a ceremony to commemorate camera operator and journalist Dmitry Zavadskiy who disappeared seven years ago. BAJ members laid flowers at Zavadskiy's former residence and greeted his mother. According to a BAJ representative, July 7 has become a day of professional integrity for journalists who continue Zavadskiy's work in reporting unbiased and truthful information. BAJ also expressed hope that the GOB would one day investigate Zavadskiy's disappearance and hold accountable those responsible. Zavadskiy, once President

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Lukashenko's personal camera operator, disappeared on July 7, 2000, at the Minsk National Airport at the age of 28.

¶7. Opposition Activist Fined for Poetry

On July 8, Vitebsk authorities fined opposition activist Boris Khomaida USD 145 for allegedly staging an unauthorized demonstration in the city center. Earlier that day, Khomaida stood downtown with a poster carrying lines from a poem written by prominent Belarusian national poet Yanka Kupala to draw attention to the poet's 125th birthday. Khomaida has been fined and arrested several times for his opposition activities and distribution of independent newspapers.

¶8. Opposition Conference Attendees Questioned

Former de-facto opposition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich's press office on July 9 reported that attendees of his May 20 "For Freedom Movement" founding conference in Grodno were summoned to the local ideology departments and ordered to write reports on the conference.

Milinkevich linked the questionings to his attempts to register the movement and argued that the ideology officers abused their power by questioning the For Freedom activists.

¶9. MF Denied Registration Again

The GOB on July 10 denied MF's latest request for official registration. Authorities denied MF registration in May due to "clerical errors" on the application, which MF spokesperson Boris Goretsky explained were corrected and resubmitted in the latest request. Goretsky vowed that MF would appeal the authorities' decision, maintaining that the GOB deliberately refuses MF registration.

¶10. Religious Activists File Complaints

On July 6-10, Christian Democratic Party member Denis Sadovskiy and Protestant lawyer Sergey Lukanin filed complaints to the Minsk

district court over a July 3 police raid on Sadovskiy's apartment and their brief detentions (with four other Protestants) while campaigning to change the 2002 religion law. Sadovskiy claimed that the police broke into his apartment, seized his personal belongings and Protestant books without witnesses present, and insulted and beat him before holding him at the detention center for six hours. Police failed to produce identification or official grounds for the search. Police apprehended Lukin two hours after Sadovskiy's arrest when he rushed to the apartment to prevent the confiscation of Sadovskiy's property and campaign papers.

Domestic Economy

[11. Belarus' Property Vouchers Extended Till 2010](#)

On July 7, the GOB extended the validity of privatization vouchers until June 30, 2010. The vouchers were issued to Belarusians in 1994-1997 to allow people to get their share of the national wealth, but Belarus never had a developed stock market and selling vouchers to anybody other than the state is illegal. Only five million out of the eight million Belarusians who were eligible to receive vouchers got one and over half of all received vouchers were invested in facilities designated by the state. Now that the deadline is extended, Belarusians are still able to receive a fair price for their vouchers if and when the country's privatization policy changes.

[12. Customs Double Payments to State Budget](#)

Belarus' Customs Committee Chair Alexander Shpilevskiy informed Lukashenko on July 9 that Customs payments to the state budget doubled in January-June to USD 2 billion. Shpilevskiy lauded the increase, but noted that it was unclear how Belarus' new Customs code, which came into effect on July 1, would affect the payments.

[13. International Reserves Up 70 Percent](#)

According to the National Bank website, Belarus' international reserves increased 70 percent in January-June to USD 2.34 billion, largely due to Gazprom's USD 625 million payment for 12.5 percent of Belarus' natural gas transportation company Beltransgaz. Other installment payments will follow in 2008-2010. In 2006, Belarus' international reserves rose by 6.7 percent to USD 1.38 Billion.

[14. Consumer Prices Increase .43 Percent in June](#)

On July 11, Head of the Minsk Price Control Department Iosif Rachytsky announced that June consumer prices in Belarus increased 0.43 percent. Authorities routinely inspect and reprimand businesses, particularly monopolies, which allow price rises above 0.5 percent monthly.

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[15. Quote of the Week](#)

On July 9, the State Secretary of the Belarusian-Russian Union State Pavel Borodin chided Ukrainian President Yushchenko for delivering a greetings message in Ukrainian to participants of the Slavyanski Bazar music concert in Vitebsk:

"It should not be that the Ukrainians become so independent that they stop saying "hello." Lukashenko spoke Russian and Putin's message is also in Russian, despite the fact that he could have used his German, French, or English."

[Note: Borodin himself used the Belarusian word "nezalezhniy" - meaning independence - instead of using the Russian variant "nezavisimiy." End note.]

Stewart